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Confessing the Secrets of Others: Pascale Petit's Poetic Employment of Latin American Cultures and the Mexican Artist, Frida Kahlo

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Abstract

This essay works to review the poetry of the Welsh-French writer Pascale Petit through the lens of recent theoretical scholarship relating to women, violence, and confession. More specifically, through a detailed analysis of two of her collections, *The Zoo Father* (2001) and *The Wounded Deer* (2005), I examine the ways in which Petit attempts to extricate confessional poetry from the stereotype of self-indulgent, 'awful' femininity outlined by Deryn Rees-Jones in *Consorting with Angels* (2005). It is my view that by recapitulating stories of women and violence in a variety of new contexts, Petit is able to reconfigure the politics of sexual violence, radically re-conceptualizing the traditional meaning of victimhood, the relationship between victims and perpetrators, and the stubbornly gendered notions of activity and passivity. This, I argue, is demonstrated most explicitly in the mythological poems of *The Zoo Father*, and in Petit's poems about Frida Kahlo in *The Wounded Deer*. Locating the poetry of Petit alongside the painting of Frida Kahlo, I analyze the extent to which these artists are identified as 'confessional', and interrogate the validity, as well as the usefulness, of this problematic (and gendered) descriptor.

Keywords: Confession; poetry; visual arts

In her 2001 collection, *The Zoo Father*, the poet Pascale Petit (born 1953) directs her words to her abusive and neglectful father. In one particular poem from this volume, entitled 'The Fish Daughter', she is moved to reflect upon the power and effect of these words:

> You could make a rasp
> from the teeth on my tongue,
> with the things I'm saying,
> and grate the past with it.
> I open my cavernous mouth
> so you can see how everything
> is toothed: my jaws,
> palate, pharynx . . . (11.6-13)

The power of speaking is reified in this poem, as the tongue becomes a tool for shaping wood that can obliterate the past suffering. The 'cavernous mouth' seems to contain almost infinite space, but rather than exposing the soft flesh of the tongue, the open jaws bristle with weapons and probes. The father/fishermen, then, has an unpleasant surprise; the daughter/fish he has caught is, in fact, the pirarucú – a mythical fish that is native to the Amazonian basin, and which can grow up to two metres long, with scales of up to six centimetres in length. This is no passive victim but a subject of power and strength, even while she/it is being exploited. Here, Petit turns to another culture's mythology in order to rethink ideas about victims of sexual

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violence. In this essay, I consider how Petit challenges traditional critical views of confessional women poets as self-indulgent. I study her strategy of transposing narratives of sexual abuse to new cultural settings, placing particular focus on Petit's use of Amazonian mythology and the life of the Mexican artist Frida Kahlo as new contextual frameworks for her tales of sexual violence.

Petit faces problems in using the confessional mode to reconceptualize sexual violence and I would like to set out these difficulties before providing some detailed analysis of Petit's poetry. In 'Towards a New Feminist Theory of Rape' (2002), Carine Melkom Mardorossian illuminates the ways in which feminist criticism has rejected the analysis of women's individual experiences of sexual violence in favour of more abstract theorizing: 'instead of justifying our critical discourse through an appeal to women's rape experiences', she argues, 'we should examine what the category encompasses in different spaces and times and investigate its relation to other areas of women's lives in the public sphere' (746). Similarly, in 'Private and Public Wars' (2006), Pascale Petit notices that, while critics admire writing about public instances of violence such as 9/11, literature that deals with private wars ('so often the mistreatment of women and children', according to Petit) is accused of self indulgence, lack of consideration for the reader and substitution of craft for 'sensational subject matter' (8; 10). Women's 'private' experiences are not viable material for poetry and Petit is right to assert that one anxiety concerning confessional poetry is shame about 'what goes on in the supposed haven of home', and the need for, 'masks of respectability and distance' (10). Petit argues that 'when confessional poets remove the mask they speak as society's representative victims because their personal crises reflect a larger social and cultural breakdown' (10). Petit is, however, aware that 'poets who write intimately about their families . . . are transgressing socially imposed silences, exposing what is concealed and uncomfortable' (11).

In *Consorting with Angels* (2005), the poet and critic Deryn Rees-Jones recognizes a problem for women who write confessionally, and summarizes the politics of this problem in a manner that is particularly relevant to Petit. Rees-Jones visualizes a dilemma in which the woman poet either confesses while embracing the stereotype of a self-indulgent, undisciplined femininity, or she restrains her feelings in order to remain within conventional womanhood:

> The woman who confesses is frequently read as testifying only to her anguish and her own 'weakness'; she is simply revealing the awfulness of femininity which was known to be there all along, and which, in the most simplistic terms has led to her oppression in the first place. And it is here that we see the exact nature of the problem: for if the woman poet does remain silent, if the awfulness of her confessional truth is such that it will only oppress her further, she is left where she started and cannot speak at all. Alternatively, she can speak a version of self which also confirms a certain kind of femininity – that of beauty passivity, orderliness and self-control – but which nevertheless fails to 'tell it like it is'. (25)

In 'Private and Public Wars', Petit seems to sympathize with Rees-Jones's view, when she discusses representations of Sylvia Plath. Petit notes that Plath made 'the personal into her own symbolic language, a new mythos', but she regrets the fact that 'one of the disadvantages of confessional poetry is that its sensational content can attract too much attention so that the quality of the writing is neglected' (11). As Plath

moves into emotional territories, then, the art of her poetry is potentially eclipsed by the stereotype of an undisciplined and self-indulgent femininity.

The content of Petit's poetry is similarly 'sensational'. However, through an analysis of two of her collections, *The Zoo Father* and *The Wounded Deer* (2005), I will examine the ways in which Petit attempts to extricate confessional poetry from the stereotype of self-indulgent, 'awful' femininity. By retelling stories of women and violence in new contexts, Petit can reformulate the politics of sexual violence, radically reconceptualizing the traditional meaning of victimhood, the relationship between victims and perpetrators, and the stubbornly gendered notions of activity and passivity. This is demonstrated most lucidly in the mythological poems of *The Zoo Father*, and in Petit's poems about Frida Kahlo in *The Wounded Deer*.

When commenting on her poems during a reading at the Guardian Hay Festival, Petit reiterated the difficulty of writing confessionally in Britain: 'In the UK, very personal intense poetry is treated with suspicion by some' (2006). As a consequence, Petit turns to other models:

> Apart from the gender thing, there's also the fact that I'm not British, and haven't looked to British poetry for models. I've looked more to America, Europe, Australia. So, to try and answer you: I don't have British roots, nor any firm roots. (2006)

As a Welsh/French subject, Petit's identity is not linked to any idea of Britishness. This seems to follow the logic that Kirsti Bohata outlines when she writes of Britishness as 'a misleading label that disguises English cultural hegemony and a project of assimilation' (6). Rather than adopting a label that includes her in English culture, its literary traditions and its prejudices concerning confessionalism, Petit looks to Europe, Australia and particularly the continent of Latin America. As Robert Crawford states in *Identifying Poets* (1993), it 'is the outward–looking, expansive gaze which makes possible the interaction with a "significant other", a foreign culture in which gifts for the future of one's own culture may be located, and in which an illuminating reflection of one's own identity (or desired identity) may be glimpsed' (12).

The gift that foreign cultures give to Petit's poetics is one of relevance and urgency that unravels the stereotype of indulgent femininity. In ''Private and Public Wars', Petit offers a useful anecdote that tells how at a conference in Lithuania, a delegate suggested that a poem describing the slow reduction of an abusive father's power, might be relevant to Lithuanians who suffered under the KGB (13-14). Although Petit writes about specific, personal experience, hers, it seems, is not a solipsistic confessionalism; rather, her poetry extends across different cultures in ways that imply its universal resonances.

The Zoo Father is inspired by Petit's travel amongst indigenous peoples in the Amazon rainforest, and in it the poet interrogates the early explorers of this region. As the title suggests, these men are represented as patriarchs that reduce the complex cultures and biologies of the Amazon to a zoo. One of the eponymous 'zoo-fathers' is Alexander von Humboldt, whose Latin American journey from 1799 to 1804 was celebrated as the second scientific discovery of South America. In 'The Embrace of the Electric Eel', Petit dwells on one of Humboldt's more bizarre experiments, in which he herded horses into a stream infested with electric eels. The speaker of the poem becomes one such horse while her abusive father is cast in the role of Humboldt:

‘such a picturesque spectacle of nature’
those great eels clamped against the bellies
of his threshing horses, how their eyes

almost popped out and their manes stood on end.
Though the jolt alone did not kill them. (8.11-12)

Humboldt’s reaction to the experiment is a polysyllabic, non-musical expression of fascination and awe. Humboldt is an elevated and omniscient observer as the grotesque otherness of the vampiric scene guarantees his whole subjecthood. The line lingers with four long stresses on ‘those grey eels clamped’, reiterating Humboldt’s fascination, yet the metre moves with rapidity over the details of the animals’ suffering. Humboldt’s experiment is more important than the suffering of its subjects. When we reach three long stresses (‘how their eyes’), the enjambment jolts to the next couplet which pictures those eyes suffering and bulging with pain. The metre moves in rapid anapaests through the detail of the horses’ manes to the ‘jolt’ of electricity. At the end of the line, it settles on a pyrrhic foot and the stress emphasizes that the pain of electrocution is not the sole factor in the death of the horses. The culprit is rather the observer’s deadening gaze of fascination and detachment.

Petit’s description of pain is not self-indulgent, but invites the reader to make comparisons between different cultures and situations. By recasting her father as Humboldt, Petit removes the suffering from its original context and rather than trying to articulate the inexpressible pain of abuse through a simple retelling, she creates a cultural comparison that reveals similar powers at work in each context. As Petit states: ‘By placing my father in this . . . setting, I could better understand his behaviour’ (13). As Mardorossian states, in exploring sexual violence, one cannot make women’s behaviour and psyche the site of theorizing, because that suggests that the woman is at fault (756-57). In her recontextualization of experience of sexual violence, Petit inspects the motives of the predator rather than the prey and the female victim can no more be at fault than the guileless horses.

In other poems, Petit delves further into questions of victimization and agency. In ‘Self Portrait as a Warao Violin’, the speaker becomes the violin and the abusive father figure becomes the player. This poem is one of a series of self-portraits, which also includes ‘Self Portrait as a Dug-Out Canoe’. The notion of a ‘self-portrait’ suggests that the reproduction of the subject’s authentic self, yet Petit contradicts this idea by investing inanimate objects with a subjective identity. Initially, it seems that the speaker has placed the ‘zoo-father’ as an indigenous part of the community: the player of the tribe’s violin. However, the following lines complicate this interpretation: ‘Even the jaguar and monkey / stand on their hind legs’ (20.5-6). Petit uses mythologies surrounding the origins of the Warao violin, which are cited in Dale Olsen’s *Music of the Warao of Venezuela* (1996). Olsen explains that the Warao’s story tells of a creature – half–man, half–monkey – named Nakurao, who brought the violin from a foreign country. When Nakurao plays the violin, the creatures,– including the jaguar, the deer, the howler monkey, and various species of bird – all dance (106-10). In using the Warao mythology, Petit introduces criticism of the father-figure, who, as an outsider, imposes his music in ways that are painful for both the listeners (standing in the awkward hind-legs posture) and the speaker-instrument herself, who remains compliant as the father ‘rub-rubs’ her body (20.8).

That said, the woman/violin is not simply a passive object; her agency is revealed after she is hung up, when everyone else is asleep:

> No one but my father can touch me.
> When he sleeps
>
> the night breeze blows across my strings
> and makes them hum. (20.19-21)

Irregular metre characterizes the initial line; the feeling is of uncertainty, yet the stresses that fall on the second syllable of 'no-one', the first syllable of 'father' and on 'touch' indicate the isolation of the woman/violin, the overbearing presence of the zoo-father, and his relationship to her/it. The final truncated line, with its three long stresses, generates a sense of expectation, which culminates in an act of creation from the previously passive woman/violin. Sets of three long stresses are used in each line of the couplet, emphasizing both the agent of the creative act – 'night breeze blows' – and its effects on the strings, as it 'makes them hum'. The image is reminiscent of the Aeolian Harp, as the wind produces music from an inanimate instrument. Although the wind appears to 'play' the strings, the level of expectation that precedes the music-making works to situate the woman/violin as the force that wills this music into being. At the very least, the woman/violin is free from the violinist's influence, which, in light of the Warao traditions described by Olsen, seems appropriate. Olsen, after all, explains that for the Warao, it is not the player or singer but 'the song–text that is believed to carry the weight of evoking the spirits' (17). The violin is not an inanimate object or simply the property of the violin player, but rather an autonomous subject that can create its own music even while it is being exploited. Petit's view of the victim here is self-consciously incongruous, problematizing simple dichotomies between passivity and activity; by using the Warao mythology, Petit borrows from another tradition and another mythology in order to reinvent relations of sexual power.

The introduction of a new context as a means to confess is a theme in Petit's pamphlet, *The Wounded Deer*, which features poems that are based on the life and work of the Mexican artist, Frida Kahlo. Like Petit, Kahlo suffers the consequences of being 'confessional'. *Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo* (1963) by Hayden Herrera constantly images Kahlo in terms of weakness, self-indulgence and narcissism in a manner that is reminiscent of the antipathy for the 'awfulness of femininity' described by Rees-Jones (25).

In the introduction to *Frida Kahlo* (2005), a pamphlet to accompany a recent exhibition of Frida Kahlo's work (Tate Modern, 9th June-9th October 2005), the curators, Emma Dexter and Tanya Barton, begin with the question 'Who was Frida Kahlo?', revealing more about the cult of personality that has grown up around Kahlo than her art (1). This biographical slant remains as an integral part of the commentary on the exhibition. In the same pamphlet, while commenting on Kahlo's painting in relation to Western movements , Jane Burton suggests that the artist's 'dream–like imagery may owe something to Surrealism, of which, despite her statements to the contrary, Kahlo was very likely aware' ('Drawings' 15). When writing on Kahlo's death, Burton explains that '[d]octors reported a pulmonary embolism, relating to a bout of pneumonia, though it has also been suggested that she committed suicide' ('Achieving Equilibrium' 29-30). I list these comments to show how much room is made for speculation and how often confessional, self–driven art gives the viewer (or

reader) a sense of knowing the artist intimately. As a consequence, statements like these emerge; Kahlo is portrayed as suicidal, and Burton cannot admit that Kahlo is free from Western influence.

Petit and Kahlo are inextricable from iconographies of suffering. Petit emphasizes the sexual violence that characterized her youth, while Kahlo suffered physical ailments all her life due to a debilitating accident suffered as a teenager on a trolley-bus. However, both women present a defiant female self to their public. Kahlo's numerous self-portraits are renowned for subverting the idea of the face as a means of expressing identity, thus undermining the idea that the selves presented in her paintings are authentic or 'true'. As Andrea Kettenmann writes in *Frida Kahlo 1907 – 1954* (2003), Kahlo's self portraits often 'suggest that the face shown is in fact a mask, behind which her true feelings are hidden' (46). As I have discussed in my analysis of the *Zoo Father*, Petit constructs a number of poetic self portraits, such as 'Self Portrait as a Warao Violin'. The poet's portrayal of herself as an object generates some doubt in the reader as to whether her authentic self is being presented or not. Petit's 'portraits' of Kahlo in *The Wounded Deer* are another self-conscious way of ironically referring back to her own practice. Petit deflects the authenticity of her confession by writing of and in Kahlo's voice, and the presence of Kahlo's paintings in Petit's poems testifies that this writing does not revolve around the solipsistic, self-indulgent poet.

Some of Petit's poems are based on Kahlo's self-portraits, such as 'Self-Portrait with a Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird'. While some have seen the thorn necklace simply as a pseudo-religious icon of suffering, Petit uses the painting as a jumping off point for her own discussion of sexuality and its problems. In *Frida*, Hayden Herrera entitles a chapter focusing on Kahlo's husband, Diego Rivera, and his infidelity 'A Necklace of Thorns', after the Kahlo self-portrait. However, it is interesting to note that in this chapter, Herrera tells of Kahlo's difficulty with sexual intercourse: 'One friend recalls that when Frida returned to Mexico, she was unhappy because a "handsome American man" had jilted her, and for a cruel reason: her physical ailments hindered the free expression of sexual love' (270). When Petit writes in Kahlo's voice, this difficulty is the subtext:

> When I came to you last night in my thorn necklace
> with the dead hummingbird, its wings
> were flying me back to the day of the accident.
> When the moment came for you to enter me
> I grinned at the sugar skulls and wax doves
> and tried not to think of the crash. (8.1-6)

Symbols from Kahlo's *Self Portrait with a Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird* (1940) reappear here in the thorn necklace, with its connotations of self-sacrifice and Catholic suffering, and in the Aztec icon of the hummingbird. According to Maria Longhenna in *Maya Script: A Civilization and its Writing* (2000), the Aztecs believed that 'the soul of a warrior who fell ill in battle became a hummingbird' (162). The dead hummingbird, then, signifies a malady of the soul; in the context of Petit's poem, it could refer to the victim's difficulty in overcoming a 'crash', an event that is later shown to be akin to a rape. In the moment of intercourse, the hummingbird transports Kahlo/Petit back to the moment of trauma. The totemic symbols of 'sugar skulls' and 'wax doves' represent the remedy of art and are objects that Kahlo made.

They enable the maker to come to terms with death and to make manifest a desire for peace. The figures that accompany Kahlo in *Self Portrait with a Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird* have a similar purpose. The monkey is reminiscent of the Aztec god, Ozomatli, described by Longhenna as 'the patron god of scribes, artists, and mathematical calculation' (162), while according to Helga Prignitz-Poda in *Frida Kahlo: The Painter and her Work* (2003), the black cat may represent Kahlo's interest in 'imagery of voodoo and magic' (41). However, even these icons cannot distract from the trauma of the rape/crash:

> the handrail piercing me like a first lover,
> and bounced me forward, my clothes torn off,
> my body sparkling with the gold powder
> spilt from a fellow passenger. (8.7-10)

The infamous accident of Kahlo's youth, in which the handrail of the trolley pierced her stomach and exited via her vagina, is here referenced. Deploying imagery that is based around jolting, piercing, and torn clothes, Petit, as I suggested earlier, aligns the accident to a rape. In this extract, Petit also subverts accounts of the accident relayed in Herrera's *Frida*, such as that of her companion, Alejandro Gómez Arias:

> Frida was totally nude. The collision had unfastened her clothes. Someone in the bus, probably a house painter, had been carrying a packet of powdered gold. This package broke, and the gold fell all over the bleeding body of Frida. When people saw her they cried, 'La bailerina, la bailarina!' With all the gold on her red, bloody body, they thought she was a dancer. (Alejandro Gómez Arias qtd in Herrera: 49)

Gomez Arias's account is highly sexualized. In both versions, however, it appears that Kahlo must become aware of the dangers that life poses, rather than remaining the guileless creature from before the accident, described by Kahlo as, 'a young intelligent girl, but impractical' (qtd. in Herrera: 48). After the rape/collision, Kahlo's body is simultaneously an object of suffering and a glittering object of desire. In Petit's version, Kahlo describes how: 'They laid me on the billiard table / . . . thinking me dead' (8.14-15). Petit echoes Gómez Arias's description of how he, 'picked up Frida and put her in the display window of a billiard room' (qtd. in Herrera: 49). Kahlo is described as an exhibited object that arouses and gratifies others. It is no coincidence that Petit excludes this humiliating image from her version.

Petit contradicts other parts of Gómez Arias's story, such as his description of a piece of iron being pulled from Kahlo's body and how, ' her screaming was louder than the [ambulance] siren' (ibid). In Petit's telling, Kahlo is silent:

> . . . In that slow silence
> it's not true that I cried out. I only thought
> about the toy I'd bought that day,
> staggered about searching for it, before I collapsed. (8.10-13)

Petit here shifts the focus from the victimized and suffering body to the interiority of the mind. In Kahlo's *Self Portrait with a Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird*, leaves surround her image, and, as Prignitz-Poda notes, they 'are clearly built up into protective walls' (32). Prignitz-Poda also suggests that in showing the reverse of

leaves, Kahlo echoes the Mexican phrase, '"turning a leaf" which means "changing the subject"'; she concludes that '[t]he inverted leaf . . . always indicates another level of meaning behind the apparent one' (33). However, Petit recognizes in her interpretation of the painting that the notion of 'changing the subject' is not only relevant in the context of the art and its meaning, but also in relation to the psyche of victim. Petit's version of Kahlo 'changes the subject' to 'the lost toy', a symbol for a certain shape of womanhood that is threatened by trauma. For Kahlo, it is a state, if not of innocence, then of impracticality. Petit, however, does not believe that this condition (lacking in self-consciousness or awareness of danger) is irrevocable and so she describes Kahlo going to 'buy another toy to replace the one I'd lost' (8.19). The act of buying the toy is then compared to a striving towards sexual love: 'Just as tomorrow night I'll try again / to get this sex thing right, and the night after that' (8.20-21). The end of the poem rethinks the notion of victim as it presents a courageous attitude to sexual difficulty. This corresponds to the presence of the butterflies and bird in *Self Portrait with a Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird*, since, as Margaret A. Lindauer states in *Devouring Frida* (1999), they represent 'the souls of warriors, thereby intimating that Frida is a combatant' (164). The speaker here is a soldier, not a victim.

The whole of the poem has been a diversion from the sexual act that initiates the poem and to which we finally return. Petit has been 'turning the leaf' in order to return to a moment of trauma that may or may not aid Kahlo and Petit in working out the difficulty of the present moment. By 'turning the leaf', Petit moves beyond the suffering yet impassive face in *Self Portrait with a Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird* to show what is beyond the mask. According to Prignitz-Poda, masks can be very effective devices for the woman artist: 'Masks are ideal for hiding, for protecting oneself from other people's gazes' (39). In the case of Frida Kahlo, Prignitz-Poda is adamant that masks were 'a perfect instrument for assuming a different personality'; in her work they 'skillfully disguise the fact that it was not the obvious that preoccupied her, but rather something inexpressible' (39).

Like Kahlo, Petit is not interested in the obvious; rather, through metaphor and comparison, she wants to remake or recast the actors and victims in the play of sexual violence. In doing so, Petit must also be confessing through her intimate knowledge of the long-term consequences of trauma. At the beginning of this essay, I quoted Petit's statement that 'when confessional poets remove the mask they speak as society's representative victims because their personal crises reflect a larger social and cultural breakdown' (10). Petit herself is a consummate wearer of masks and her work is far more complex that critics of confessional poetry might suggest. By adopting the mask of another cultural tradition or another woman's life, Petit disciplines the emotional content of her poems and she makes her depiction of 'private wars' as relevant as public conflicts. Embracing the practices of other cultures can, of course, be difficult. As Petit suggests, however, it can also usefully broaden the scope of confessional praxis so that the 'specific experience' described within a poem need 'not limit it to the personal' ('Private and Public Wars', 14).

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